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February 23, 1978

Dear Senator Cranston:

The Secretary has asked me to reply to your letter of January 29 concerning the case of John Victor Stoen, currently the subject of a custody dispute in Guyana. Similar expressions of interest have been received from several other Members of Congress.

While we in the Department of State sympathize very much with Mr. and Mrs. Stoen in their efforts to regain custody of their son, regrettably there is little we can do to be of assistance. Neither the Department of State nor the courts of the State of California have the authority to enforce a U.S. court decision concerning the custody of John Victor as long as he is physically located outside of the United States. Child custody orders issued in the United States are normally not accepted for enforcement in another country on the basis of comity. While any American custody decision might be given evidentiary weight in the Guyanese proceeding, by no means will it be binding on that court.

Since the initiation of the custody suit last August, the Department of State and our Embassy in Guyana have been in close contact with the Stoens and their attorneys, both American and Guyanese. The Embassy has attended all court proceedings, when permitted to attend, and has assisted the Stoens in gaining access to Guyanese government officials. The Embassy has regularly had conversations with the opposing attorneys and has spoken with Mr. Jim Jones, the head of the People's Temple. As Mr. Jones is also an American citizen and entitled to the same rights and protection as Mr. and Mrs. Stoen, the Embassy has been careful to avoid prejudicing the outcome of the dispute. It is the Embassy's responsibility to seek to ensure that

The Honorable
Alan Cranston,
United States Senate.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE A/CDC/MR

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the judicial outcome of the dispute results from a fair and impartial determination of the merits of the case, and all of our efforts are so directed.

Following a hearing held on January 10, Mr. Stoen's attorney stated that he anticipated a favorable decision at the conclusion of the proceedings. Mr. Stoen himself was guardedly optimistic in conversations with officers at the Department of State on January 27.

As the case is presently before the court, it would be improper for the Department of State or the Embassy to approach the Government of Guyana on behalf of either party. You may be assured, however, that the Government of Guyana is fully aware of the United States' interest in a fair and impartial adjudication of the merits of the dispute.

The Department will keep you informed on the progress of the case. Should you require further information, please contact Miss Elizabeth A. Powers, in our Office of Special Consular Services, Telephone 202-632-3015.

Sincerely,

Douglas J. Bennet, Jr.
Assistant Secretary
for Congressional Relations

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Clearances: SCS-Ms. Powers
SCS-Mr. Rivera
SCS-Mr. Dobrenchuk
SCS-Mr. Lambert
CA-Ms. Watson
H-Mr. Krizek